Hierarchical Differentiation among Dalits

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This is in response to the rejoinder of Sunita Reddy Bharati (''Dalit': A Term Asserting Unity', *EPW*, October 19-25, 2002) to an earlier article of A M Shah ('The 'Dalit' Category and Its Differentiation', *EPW*, April 6, 2002) who argued that social scientists should abstain from making journalistic sweeping statements about prevailing social reality in India. Shah points out that dalits do not constitute a homogeneous category, rather they are hierarchically differentiated. Bharati has contested this by arguing that the word dalit signifies a unity of the oppressed people, which is equally important. Shah and Bharati are both stating their observation on social reality from different perspectives even as their viewpoints pass each other by. Whereas Bharati is correct in articulating the view that there should be unity in the identity of the dalits, Shah, on the other hand, emphasises that as social scientists we should look into hierarchy among dalits and work out its implications. In this regard Shah has a realistic view, which has tremendous implications for the recent discourse on dalit identity, invariably created by the dalit scholars. We may point out that Shah's observations are equally valid for dalits of Punjab. What has remained unexplored, unnoticed and unanalysed is the relationship between this hierarchy and social transformation among the dalits. Once this aspect of the discourse on dalit identity is taken into consideration, one may find that within the dalits too, there are 'oppressors' and 'oppressed'. Similarly, one may find a general observation in existing literature that the better off among the dalits have benefited from the reservation policy. If we quantify this observation in the form of the actual identification of castes that have availed of maximum benefits from the reservation policy, then it is quite probable that one single caste in a region emerges as the major beneficiary. In this regard Bharati and others she has mentioned are wrong in their assertion to treat dalits as a totality of the oppressed. As we will see little later, the hierarchical differentiation among the dalits is oppressive and functions on the principle of exclusion. It appears Bharati has missed the significance, relevance and implications of what A M Shah has in fact pointed out on the basis of his experience of ground realities in Gujarat.

Wittgenstein wrote in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that 'what cannot be said can be shown'. Thus the best way to examine and evaluate the issue of hierarchical differentiation is to know whether it exists all over India. If so, what are the social implications of this differentiation? I would like to comment on the empirical reality of Punjab to show the relevance of the arguments of A M Shah.

In Punjab scheduled castes constitute 30 per cent of the total population; this proportion is the highest among all other states. There are 37 officially listed castes among dalits in the state, but there is a great degree of confusion in the nomenclature of these castes. If we go by original nomenclature, the number of the dalit castes would go down to less than 30. Let us consider examples of changes in the nomenclatures of the two most numerous dalit castes in Punjab. The first caste is traditionally called chamar, but now it is illegal to address a member of this caste by this name. It derived its name from their work. Over a period of time, however, the caste experienced changes largely due to the interaction among the four religions till the end of the 19th century, namely, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity. As a result the caste name experienced changes as and when members converted to another religion. Those who became Muslims were called 'mochi' and their Sikh counterparts became Ramdasia. In the 20th century they revitalised themselves through the ad-dharm movement as a result of which a section among them became ad-dharmi. Mangoo Ram, the leader of the ad-dharam movement, belonged to this caste. If we accept early British writings, then the Kabir Panthi Julahas were also primarily the members of this caste.

The second caste is called churha and like the first it is also illegal to address any member of this caste by this name. They were traditional scavengers. There is also nomenclatural diversity in it due to religious conversions. Probably the most prominent and widespread change among them is that as Hindus they are called balmikis by claiming their links with Rishi Balmik who wrote *Ramayana*. As Muslims and Sikhs they got the names of mussali and mazbi respectively. It may further be noted that in Gurdaspur district in particular they converted to Christianity and now they are called Masih.

Historically, society could be seen as being divided into touchable and untouchable castes. More important, however, has been the caste hierarchy in which different castes are arranged as high and low according to their status. The dalits belong to the lowest rung of this hierarchy. Are the dalits a homogeneous category? No. In fact social reality is contrary to the expectations and all dalit castes too form a hierarchy. Most experts in this area have not worked out the positions of various dalit castes in the hierarchy. In spite of this, one thing is sure, i e, the ad-dharmis are at the top of the hierarchy in Punjab. So far as the balmikis or the mazbis are concerned, they are quite low – perhaps at the bottom of the hierarchy; the position of the sansis is also very low.

Why do the ad-dharmis occupy such a high caste position among the dalits? There have been many reasons for their upward mobility. As a result of British rule in India, the leather trade picked up and the demand for leather benefited this caste economically. In Punjab, relatively richer members of this caste started looking for other avenues to improve their conditions. In the late19th and the beginning of 20th century some of them started emigrating to Australia and the US. One of them was Mangoo Ram – son of a relatively prosperous trader. When he reached the US, Mangoo Ram came in contact with the Gadhar party members and joined them impressed by their espousal of social

equality. Mangoo Ram escaped arrest after his return to India. After a stay in his village Mugowal in Hoshiarpur district, he initiated the ad-dharm movement, which spread to the Doaba region of Punjab. In the 1931 Census of India, the ad-dharm movement was successful in getting them recorded as a distinct social group. This gave the ad-dharmis a great sense of achievement. In post-independent India, the ad-dharmis got education, fully utilised the reservation policy, immigrated to England, and participated in the electoral politics. In politics they have been quite successful.

In conclusion, an incident in village Ajram in Hoshiarpur district provides an insight into how the caste system operates within the dalit castes. A young ad-dharmi girl fell in love with a balmiki boy. When their parents came to know of this, the girl eloped with the boy. Her parents followed them and finally they were caught. The girl was brought back to village where she was confined in the house. The girl's parents told her that she would not be married to the balmiki boy as he belonged to a lower caste. After a few days the girl burnt herself to death – a tragic end that serves as an example to prove that the caste system exists in all its virulence among the dalits and that we still have a long to way to go to achieve a caste-free society. EPW